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ABSTRACT

Classroom areas organized into centers for specific study purposes are discussed. These centers are used for individual or small group work. The physical arrangement of the area used for a study center is described, including the organization of furniture, materials, and preferred locations. Suggestions are made for the management and stocking of centers for various subjects, such as mathematics, language arts, social studies, science, and humanities. The rationale and objectives of such centers are presented. (JD)

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CENTER ON CENTERS

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Why centers?

As a teacher you are responsible to create an educational environment in which individual learners have opportunities to learn, learn how to learn and want to become life-long learners. Resources available to you need to be identified, collected, and organized in ways to help you build better educational opportunities for students.

What you do with your resources -- space, furniture, equipment, curriculum materials, supplies -- can help you to help learners. Organized space with learning centers identified can enable you to be more effective. Centers can be used to provide a variety of learning experiences for learners with diverse needs, interests, talents. In short, centers can help you TEACH, indeed, give you time to teach because you have:

1. options to assign learners as needed
2. options to offer students as choices
3. options to utilize different teaching strategies
4. options to provide for learner - modality needs (e.g. auditory, tactile, etc.)
5. ways to provide for learner independence
6. ways to provide for learner responsibility
7. ways to provide for guided learning activities
8. ways to focus on concept development
9. ways to focus on skill development
10. ways to focus on affective development
11. ways to keep learner engagement purposeful while you work with an instructional group.

If you have never tried centers or if you have not had success using centers, start out with one or two. Establish with students what centers are; how, when they are to be used; who uses them and most importantly, why. Establishing the management is a key factor. If you teach management directly, monitor and follow-up student use of the centers, you discover that they work and are extremely effective! As students utilize the centers, assume the responsibility entailed and are productive, you can add more centers. The management procedure will be "built in", and you will be adding more options for learners and for yourself!

What are centers?

Centers are classroom areas organized for a specific purpose or purposes. They encourage order in an environment where options are possible. Centers are not a new idea. The logic of having a special place organized for a specific kind of activity is a part of sound classroom management. They might be called:

-- concept centers
-- skill centers
-- discovery centers
-- quest centers
-- fun centers
-- learning centers
-- interest centers
-- resource centers
-- laboratory centers
-- experience centers
-- skill stations
-- learning stations
-- learning areas

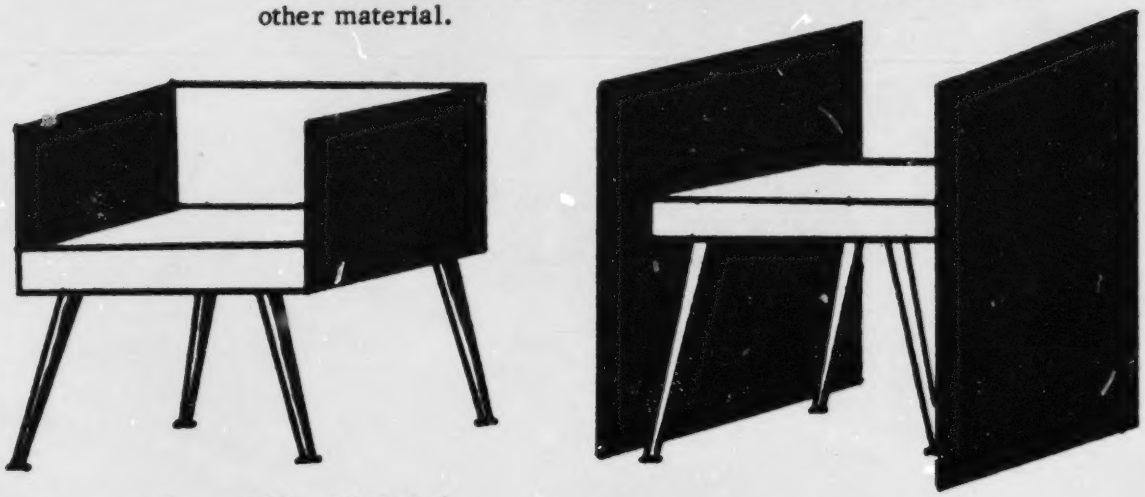
Whatever they are called, however they are labeled, centers are areas where many kinds of activity can take place. They invite learning when they are "eye-catching" and "thought-provoking"! If organized to do so, they can provide opportunities for a student to make choices, decisions, and demonstrate independence and responsibility.

Centers have as much applicability to an area where different groups are scheduled into the area at different times as in an area where students are scheduled to do most of their work. Where different groups come and go, care must be taken to organize centers so that they are functional and yet do not interfere with other classroom activity. They need not be distracting to groups to whom they are not pertinent -- one period's treasure does not need to become another period's headache -- if you plan, organize, teach, alternate materials, monitor and follow-up usage!

What are centers like?

A center can be any place or places where individual/s can work at a task with guidance (directions, instructions, equipment, material, etc.). Such places and areas could include:

1. a carrel
   -- one commercially designed and purchased
   or
   -- one "school-made" using two or three sheets of cardboard or other material.



2. a table and chair/s
   -- placed against a wall to screen out distraction

3. a desk
   -- turned toward a wall

4. a counter
   -- used to "house" folders, boxes with individual pieces of material that give directions and/or resources

5. a shelf
   -- also used to hold folders, boxes, etc.

6. a file drawer
   -- used to hold materials, folders with instructions, etc.

7. boxes
   -- used like file drawers or mini-laboratories

8. other things you have

Centers might be labeled. Labeling gives a center focus. This can be done in many ways. Vividness is added when occasional labels such as the following are used:

"Ye Olde Think Tank"
"Study Spot"
"Quiet Zone for Thinkers"
"Get Ahead Here!"
"Dig In!"
"Will You Say: I Didn't Know That!"
"Author's Corner"
"Thinking Rink"

How do centers work?

Once a center is organized, how it is to be used must be established. This is an essential step. As you work with management strategies initially -- who will do what, where it is to be done, when the center is available, how it is used and why -- details are spelled out. Acceptable student behaviors are defined and responsibilities explained. For example, the total group should discuss:

-- What centers are for
-- What materials are in the center
-- How materials are to be used, cared for
-- How many students can work in a center at a time
-- How students work in the center
-- Who is responsible for the center and when

By using general labels on the center areas, they can be utilized during any period with any class or content area and not be distracting. By simply changing the specific content materials in the center, the center can then accomodate a different class with different needs.

Activities can be organized for specific groups or classes and used in the areas and spaces (centers) set up. If definite outcomes are expected, the activities should include instructions for what is to be done. The student needs to know:

1. the objective or goal (what is to be accomplished)
2. directions/instructions (how it is to be done)
   (where to get resources needed if not included)
3. assessment procedure (how to evaluate process or product)
4. retrieval check procedure (where to record progress achievement)

When reviewing management procedures with students, much of the above can be set as class standards. The way you organize depends on the time and situation. If you already have learning packets or units or discrete lessons prepared, it would be well to ask these questions: Is the objective stated? Are the instructions clear? Is there an assessment instrument? Is there a retrieval or a way to record progress?

You may be utilizing multi-resources but setting up learning activities or experiences so that only an objective and specific instructions are needed. Resource availability is then given in a general way and the method of assessment and retrieval also explained. For instance, the total group should discuss and explore materials and resources they will have to use during the year. This should include equipment, where to find equipment, how to operate, utilize and store it. Such resources to include:

AUDIO-VISUAL EQUIPMENT AND RESOURCES

-- films
-- filmstrips
-- records
-- tapes
-- study prints
-- slides
-- overhead transparencies
-- etc.

PRINTED MATTER

-- texts
-- trade books
-- reference books (encyclopedias, etc.)
-- magazines, periodicals
-- newspapers
-- pamphlets, brochures, etc.
-- graphic material (charts, diagrams, cartoons, posters, maps, globes, etc.)
-- microforms

REALIA

-- Science kits
-- simulated kits (telephone, driver, piano, etc.)
-- Social Studies kits, banks
-- etc.

PROGRAMMED MATERIAL

-- books, kits
-- teaching machines
-- etc.

Remember, this isn't all done at once!

Students should discuss assessment methods to determine what and how well something is learned. Such techniques include:

1. Check points with teacher or aide (curriculum imbedded tests)
2. Answer files, sheets, books, etc.
3. Conferences with peers, teacher, etc.
4. Other.

Students should discuss ways to keep track of themselves in order to know how they are progressing, what they are achieving such as:

1. Individual progress profiles
2. Group progress profiles
3. Combination of individual and group profiles
4. Informal observation
5. Other

However you decide to structure the management for a specific center, the important thing is that students understand what is expected. The written instructions - format - part of the structure, you devise can be incorporated in a:

-- folder
-- box
-- or an envelope

and then these materials can be placed in, or adjacent to, the area set up as a center.

Colors on the folders might be used to aid identification for different classes, different subjects such as:

- Orange folder or an orange line drawn across top of folder for 5th period or history
- Blue for 3rd period or English
- Green for 1st period or Spanish
- Etc.

Mini-files or boxes for different classes or different groups could be utilized. Small cardboard cartons or cardboard milk trays can be covered with contact paper or painted with easel paint or a spray paint. These containers can hold the folders, envelopes which in turn contain specific learning experiences. They can be easily stored on shelves, in cupboards or closets and brought out as needed.

Class officers, chair-persons or specially designated students could be responsible to get the mini-files out for classtime and put them away at the end of the period.

REMEMBER: *RESPONSIBILITY IS MORE LIKELY TO BE LEARNED WHEN THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN IT!*

It is possible for the centers in your room to reflect the reality goals you have determined as you have assessed student's needs and interests for whom you are responsible. It is possible for them to reflect your ingenuity in making the most of what you have to work with.

Variety helps to add "sparkle", prevents a feeling of sameness or monotony. So, as you work with centers, change some of them periodically. This change could be the sign or label, the activity, composition, or place of the center. You will be manipulating motivational variables and students will more likely be motivated!

REMEMBER: *Positively reinforcing appropriate behaviors when students are working productively and responsibly will pay off in consistent behavioral responses or more of the same!*

Don't despair over "have-nots". Explore your building and find out what you do have! Tucked in closets, store rooms, basements and back offices are, very often, veritable gold mines! Don't forget the building custodian. His knowledge of building resources will be invaluable to you.

How do centers help you teach?

If organized and functioning properly, centers can provide a way to help you to more effectively and efficiently manage your classroom. As a teacher, if you are trying to make each minute of the school day count up to meaningful, profitable learning experiences for the group of learners in your classroom and for individual learners within that group, it follows that you are constantly assessing learners as they learn, identifying learning ditches, and making on-the-spot decisions about curriculum to be used and the way it can best be presented. These decisions come in rapid-fire order minute after minute and of necessity have to be based upon what you have ready, organized and planned.

It is possible for centers to represent a part of your planning, organization and ready-to-do activities. How effective they are depends on the centers themselves, the way you present them to learners, the way you teach the management, how carefully you monitor their usage and how you follow up with review and re-teaching as necessary.

Where should you place centers?

Where a center is placed is dependent on the physical environment itself, options open to you, materials available and the objectives for the center itself. Some things to consider in making a decision have to do with the purpose of the center and how you propose to supervise learner engagement. For instance:

1. A testing center or a skill-drill center for practive which needs close supervision should be placed where you can monitor it easily.

2. A center with "hands-on" kinds of activities should be placed far away from an instructional group to lessen the possibility of distraction -- auditory and visual.

3. Centers set up as listening stations and/or viewing stations need to be placed so that they are functional for the student using them but do not compete for the attention of other learners.

4. Centers set up for research or "quiet" work need to be placed where learners can pursue such activity with a minimum of other stimuli but still within your "radar range".

What kinds of center should you set up?

What kind of centers to set up depends upon objectives set at a specific point in time. For example:

1. As you are teaching for concept mastery, a testing center would be needed to assess if or how much understanding a learner has.

   Observational evaluation in a group can be one way to measure what a learner knows. Where there is a question, it is advisable to get another kind of data. If the testing center with materials is set up and management established, a student can be quickly directed to "double check" and you are free to continue with your instructional group.

2. A skill - drill center or practice station can be an asset when it is "stocked" with practice materials relating to the concept you are planning to teach to a needs group.

   Knowing that you have x number of learners needing "input" and that teaching involves working with each learner until the "idea" has formed, it is strategic to have a spot to "cream-off" learners for further, structured practice when you deem it appropriate to do so. If that center is placed in close proximity to the teaching area you can monitor student engagement and his product.

3. A "hands-on" center stocked with manipulative math materials is a must if you plan to provide experiences for learners to work with "things".

   Before students work with guided learning experiences such as U-SAIL math lexes, they should have had an introduction to the concept by a teacher or another avenue in which the concept/idea is developed. A next step, working with the concept using "things", is possible with a center (space, materials ready to be used).

4. Centers prepared with media -- listening and viewing equipment as well as curriculum materials -- are valuable when research is needed within identified content. In addition, guided sheets to help students "extract" pertinent data with which to make an analysis or evaluation help insure a "success" experience.

   Using a problem-solving approach in Science or Humanities and introducing that problem to a large group, can set motivational factors into play. Small groups, teams or individual learners can then be directed to do committee or independent research with a place and space to work.

5. Centers arranged to entice learners to "read or browse" awhile, observe and discover the world about them, help to build affective responses as well as cognitive ones.

   Valuing often comes as a result of the identification made by a learner to a teacher. What a teacher makes important, shows a love for, will more likely be valued by the student. Reading spots with books, cushions, rockers offer a relaxed and quiet place to choose for a retreat. Terrariums, aquariums with flora and fauna provide attention-getting and attention-holding experiences. These may be used with directions for specific learners. (e.g. Observe what is happening in the aquarium. Write what you see using the "log" form. Or, Watch the "skeleton" fish. Plan to share what you saw with us later!)

What changes can be made with centers? In centers?

Centers or stations may be changed to different physical positions in the room. However some centers may require certain conditions and need to remain where first placed. For example:

1. A center requiring equipment must be placed close to an outlet in accordance with safety regulations and to dispense with extension cords.

   Different teaching machines, projectors, etc. can be placed in the area designated for electrical equipment. Because students have been taught how to use the equipment, specific curriculum materials (filmstrips, records, etc.) can be changed according to the purpose of the center and the objectives specified for learners.

2. Art centers utilizing easels, paper mache, etc. need to be adjacent to a sink if extensive clean-up is part of the required maintenance.

   Art mediums may be changed as further experiences using special "techniques" are identified. Discovery expression impression products are more likely to happen if a technique is taught and then followed up with an opportunity to create something.

Some centers can be changed from one part of the room to another. When seating arrangements are changed -- moving from blocks of desks to a U shaped desk arrangement -- "free" space emerges. This will suggest different center placements. You may want to change the desk plan simply to add variety or a bit of "spice". Obviously, different arrangements should be made to facilitate specific learning objectives.

What kinds of centers are there?

When center areas have been identified for general purposes such as a math corner, science spot, etc. and are maintained as such for a long period, specific curriculum materials and activities placed in them need to be changed to meet needs of the group.

Ideas for specific centers follow. Obviously, these are not meant to be "recipes" followed exactly. They simply reflect a collection of ideas which have worked successfully in classrooms.

LANGUAGE ARTS

A WRITING CENTER may be labeled in a general way as suggested previously or labeled with a specific focus:

AUTHOR AT WORK! (Assignment/invitation to write a short story, myth, poem, haiku, limerick, sonnet, etc.)

PUBLISHER'S HAVEN (Assignment/invitation to design booklet, brochure, book, etc.)

SCENARIO PRODUCTION (Assignment/invitation to write after researching data for sets, background for costumes, customs, etc.)

PROOF-READERS HANGOUT (Assignment/invitation to look for grammatical, punctuation errors in newspaper copy, articles, themes, etc.)

PLOTS THICKEN (Assignment/invitation to write an original plot or summarize plots of books, stories, movies, TV plays, etc.)

THE PLAY'S THE THING (Assignment/invitation to write skits, a play, etc.)

YOUR GRAMMAR IS SHOWING! (Assignment/invitation to write and diagram sentences, develop sentences according to set specifications, etc.)

The writing center can be functional and productive.

The focus for the writing center can be correlated with units of work:

Newspaper Unit:
- Proofreader's Station
- Editorial Desk
- It's News Now!
- Sport's Portrait
- Comic Character's Story
- Etc.

Career's Unit or World of Work

Be a Printer!
Author At Work!
Poet's Haven
Ads Sell Books
Design a Book Jacket
Make a Picture Book
A Scientist's Dilema
Someone Who Serves Us
Etc.

Book Week Unit

Write a Sequel
Describe Your Favorite Character
Complie a Bibliography for a Group of Rock Hounds
(or Kindergarteners)
Etc.

Punctuation Unit

Write a declarative sentence.
Add a question.
Write a letter to a friend.
Etc.

A WRITING RESEARCH CENTER might have as the focus:

Locational Skills (How and where to find information.)

Media Center Skills (How and where to find equipment, data, references, material in your school, public library, or district media center.)

Specific Authors (Research background of an author, poet, illustrator, [i.e. Shakespeare; English novelists of the 19th Century, etc.])

Specific Categories (Research background of odes, ballads, sonnets, free verse, etc.)

Specific Subjects (Research irony, pathos, mood, etc.)

A READING CENTER might emphasize the focus of your current assignments or might be motivational in nature:

BROWSE AWHILE! (Paperback books -- multi-level and multi-interests represented.)

IF YOU'VE TIME TO SPARE! (Books written by authors being studied -- other than those on required list!)

CLASSICS! (Books that are considered great. Groups of books set out according to time written, nationality of author, etc.)

SELL A BOOK! (Student chooses a book to "sell" to his peers. Employs any medium or technique: skit, dramatization; review, written or oral, etc.)

READ OR VIEW AND X (EXTRA GOOD) RATED BOOK (Spotlight a special book.)

MATH

You may have units, learning activities, supplementary materials, or specific learning packages ready to use.

A DRILL CENTER might have as the focus:

SPEED UP! (Timed exercises on addition, subtraction, multiplication, division facts, fractions, decimals, base systems, algebra, etc.)

RIGHT? (Drill sheets or other instruments to work on accuracy in addition, subtraction, fractions, decimals, base systems, algebra, etc.)

TO MEASURE OR NOT TO MEASURE! (Activities to make transition to metric system easier.)

DID YOU KNOW THAT? (Experiences related to current algorithm under study.)

AN APPLICATION CENTER might focus on:

Projects (Student interest "spin-offs" such as: architectural blueprints; stage scenery designs; space allocations for Hobby Show, Fairs; distance, height calculations of school yard, flagpole, etc.)

Brochures (A "How To" pamphlet on the metric system for a housewife, carpenter, salesman, etc.)

Experiments (A challenging problem, hypothesis posed and manipulative materials available to help solve it -- if needed! e.g. Blocks to determine volume.)

Sports (Predicting outcomes by computing and comparing baseball, basketball, football statistics, etc.)

Economics (Computing and comparing credit card systems, banking systems, stock market fluctuations, cost of living indices, striker's demands and company offers, etc.)

SOCIAL STUDIES — SCIENCE — HUMANITIES

Any center area designated for one of these special subjects could contain mini-files or folders, which in turn could contain units, learning kits or packages.

The center area might also be used to highlight:

TODAY'S TOPIC! -- Current News Items

DID YOU KNOW? Science: Ecology, energy, etc.

Social Studies: Bills, debates before the national congress or state legislature; elections; editorial comments; cartoons; etc.

Humanities: Art, music, drama offerings on national, state and local levels.

WHOSE PROBLEM? -- Issues to Consider

Science: Insecticides, floridation, nerve gas disposal, etc.

Social Studies: Arms race, discrimination laws, federal aid, inflation, etc.

Humanities: Building construction for museums, building demolition of old structures, etc.

RESEARCH IT! -- Specific Topics Assigned (Directions, reminders of where to find resources need to be posted.)

Science: Parapsychological phenomena, ESP; Wonder drugs of the 60's; Ocean exploration, etc.

Social Studies: The two-party system..., Criminal law..., etc.

Humanities: Subsidies for Art? Entertainment Means..., etc.

TRY IT! -- Experiments (Directions, reminders of where to find resources should be posted or materials ready for use.)

Science: Producing mold,
Creating Electromagnets,
Dissecting insects,
Mounting butterflies,
Microscopic view of bacteria, protozoans,
Etc.

Social Studies: Making surveys,
Taking polls,
Determining slant of periodicals, newspapers,
Discussing alternative solutions to current problems
Listening to panels, debates, and predicting outcomes,
Etc.

A science center rarely fails to intrigue even the most reluctant learner -- young or old!

The focus may well tie into the current unit and concepts being developed:

Magnets

What will they pick up?
What kinds?

Leaves

Describe these leaves.
How are the leaves alike?
Make a leaf print.

A science center may "house" animal visitors -- different ones every few weeks. Small animals provide interesting "room-guests" that require the special courtesies afforded any visitor and entail responsibilities to make their stay pleasant. Animal stores and some service agencies provide for a small fee: rats, mice, gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, snakes, toads, etc.

Characteristics and needs of each animal can be identified. Comparison, evaluations made.

Various plants may be featured to observe growth patterns and care required: bulbs -- amaryllis, crocus, cacti and succulent plants; house plants; vegetables, etc.

Observations can be noted or logged for later analysis, evaluation.

SUMMARY

When centers are used appropriately, they can help to make individualization happen. They require realistic planning; organization and preparation; monitoring and FOLLOW UP.

They should be:

-- an outgrowth of the plans you made and goals set after assessing the students under your supervision.

-- purposeful in guiding students to learn how to learn and develop concepts.

-- instrumental in providing opportunities for students to assume and demonstrate responsibility whether working independently, in teams or with a small group.

-- meaningful, focused on student needs, interests, and reflect as nearly as possible in-life experiences.

TO MAKE CENTERS WORK:

1. Plan centers based on reality goals. (Make a list, indicate purpose.)

2. Organize and set up centers based on plans made. (Produce, create them in instructional area.)

3. Teach directly management procedures for their use. (Make sure students know who does what, where, when, how and WHY!)

4. Monitor use. (Check to see they are being appropriately utilized and as directed.)

5. Follow up. (Take time to evaluate; reteach -- if necessary, re-do -- if appropriate, reinforce -- if indicated.)

CENTERS can work, do work, have worked to make individualized instruction happen in an instructional area. Try one or some, follow the five points listed above and watch centers work!